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A Mighty Soul-Saving Army Against Communism: William Fetler (1883-1957) And Twentieth Century Culture Wars¹

Koos-jan de Jager

Introduction

In the 1930s, the Russian Missionary Society (RMS), directed by the Baptist Pastor William Fetler (1883-1957), published a *Five-Year Gospel Plan for Darkest Russia*. This plan, a critical parody of the Communist Five-Year Plans, was intended to be carried out by ‘a progressive united Gospel forward movement against godlessness and for Evangelism’. Millions of minds in the spiritually darkest regions of Russia, the pamphlet argues, have been poisoned by ‘the deadliest poison ever manufactured in hell’, the belief ‘that there is no God, and that one has never existed’. The antidote to this terrible poison was ‘an energetic, systematic spreading of the Gospel of Jesus Christ’. Among the objectives were the goals of distributing at least one million New Testaments and Scripture portions, sending out 200 missionaries among the Russians and other peoples of the former Russian Empire, and organising Bible and Missionary training courses for 300 evangelists.² To obtain these goals, the RMS needed financial and spiritual support. The Financial Board of the Society, working from London, stated that Christians must do

all in our power towards the Five Years of our Gospel Plan against the godless and atheistic plan of Russia. If we consider that the godless communists who are servants of the devil are not sparing millions of dollars annually to destroy faith in God, should we, as servants of the living Christ be less fervent and sacrificing to ‘contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints’? (Jude 1.3).³

At that time, the RMS, which was founded in 1907, already had established an international missionary network, supporting the work of missionaries in Russia, Eastern Europe, and the Baltic. The spiritual leader of the organisation was Pastor William Fetler, a Latvian Baptist revivalist preacher in Riga. Called in 1903 to his missionary work, Fetler travelled around the

¹ I am very grateful to George Harinck, Professor of the history of Neo-Calvinism at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, the anonymous reviewer of this journal and the members of the Dutch NOSTER PhD Seminar Historical Research in Theology and Religious Studies for their support and comments on my article.

² *Five-Year Gospel Plan for Darkest Russia* (Toronto: The Russian Missionary Society, n.d.), pp. 1 - 4. Held in the archives of the Dutch *Centraal Bond voor Inwendige Zending*, National Archives, The Hague, collection 2.19.079, box 59.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

Western world to raise money and spiritual support. In Canada, Great Britain, the USA, and Australia branches of the Society were established. In other Western European countries, like France, Switzerland, and Germany, representatives were active in raising money and support. Fetler's tendency to design grandiose plans like the *Five-Year Gospel Plan* was supplemented by an attitude of hard work to fulfil these dreams. However, even the most loyal fellows of the RMS admitted that Fetler was unpredictable and did not work long and profoundly on his projects. Even when projects were not ended, Fetler had already started new, sometimes risky projects.⁴ Notwithstanding his impressive international network, the life of William Fetler is largely ignored in historical research. Only a few non-academic biographies of the life of Fetler exist, one of them recently issued by the Russian Bible Society (founded by William Fetler and still distributing Bibles in Russia) in North Carolina, USA.⁵ In recent historical research on the Baptists in Russia, carried out by Albert W. Wardin and Mary Raber, Fetler's work is mentioned and placed in its theological and historical context.⁶

In this article, I want to take a fresh look at the life and work of Fetler and his anti-communist campaigns. First, I will give a short overview of his life, focusing on his position towards the Russian Bolsheviks. Second, I will explore the anti-communist ideas of William Fetler from the conceptual framework of culture wars. The concept *culture wars* has become an expression for secular-Catholic conflicts across nineteenth-century Europe. In these conflicts, sparked by the emergence of constitutional and democratic nation states, Catholics and anticlerical forces struggled over the place of religion in a modern polity.⁷ In current historical research, in which the scope of this concept is extended to the twentieth century, Christian anti-Communism and communist anticlericalism in the interwar period is studied, arguing for the need for further investigation of the struggle between

⁴ Rapport-Krop, De actie van Pastor W. Fetler in Nederland en wat daarover in de bladen word geschreven, 1932. [Report-Krop, The action of Pastor W. Fetler in The Netherlands and what was written about this in the newspapers, 1932] Held in the archives of F.W. Grosheide at the Historical Documentation Centre for the History of Protestantism, 1800-present, at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, collection 111.

⁵ John Fetler, *The Thunderer: The Story of William Fetler and Spiritual Revival in Russia and Latvia* (Ashville: Russian Bible Society & Revival Literature, 2014). This story is largely based on an earlier biography by James Alexander Stewart, *A Man In A Hurry. The Story of the Life and work of Pastor Basil A. Malof* (Orebrö, Sweden: Evangelipress, 1968).

⁶ Albert W. Wardin, *On the Edge: Baptists and Other Free Church Evangelicals in Tsarist Russia, 1855-1917* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2013); Albert W. Wardin, 'William Fetler: The Thundering Evangelist', *American Baptist Quarterly* 25 (2006) 235-246; Mary Raber, *Ministries of Compassion among Russian Evangelicals, 1905-1929* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2016).

⁷ Christopher Clark and Wolfram Kaiser, 'Introduction: The European culture wars', in *Culture Wars: Secular-Catholic Conflict in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, ed. by Christopher Clark and Wolfram Kaiser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 1-10.

Christianity and atheism.⁸ One of the components of culture wars is emotional discourses, as studied by Manuel Borutta for the German *Kulturkampf* in the 1870s.⁹ However, in historical studies, language and discourses of culture wars are not studied in depth. In this article, therefore, I want to focus on the anti-communist discourse of William Fetler. Central is the question of how William Fetler interpreted his mission in the context of the struggle with Communism. In his publications and speeches, Fetler used military metaphors, like 'war', 'victory', 'army' or 'weapons' frequently to accuse the atheism of the Bolsheviks. I will point out three components of Fetler's war idiom here. In the first place, Fetler argues for the existence of a worldwide war between Communism and Christianity. Second, the only outcome of this war will be a victory for Christianity, because of the power of the Bible and the Holy Spirit. In the third place, revived Christians should fight as warriors of Christ in the 'mighty soul-saving army'.¹⁰ Fetler's use of war discourse introduces a new perspective to the study of transnational anti-Communism in the twentieth century. By way of conclusion I will consider possible reinterpretations of the concept of culture wars for future historical research.

William Fetler and his Russian Missions

William Andreyevich Fetler was born in 1883 in the provincial town of Talsen, in the province of Kurland within the Latvian state of Czarist Russia. His father, Andrew Fetler, was a pioneer evangelical preacher, associated with the Baptist movement and theologically inspired by the work of Charles Spurgeon. According to the existing biographies, William Fetler received Christ as his Saviour at the age of fifteen and was called by the Spirit of God at the age of eighteen, while working as bookkeeper in a machine factory. As a young and talented man, he applied to Spurgeon's College in London, where he was accepted warmly.¹¹ Under the influence of Spurgeon's theology and in the spiritual atmosphere of the Welsh Revival, he developed his charismatic gifts. After his study, Fetler went back to Russia, where he wanted to serve his own people with the message of the gospel and spiritual revival. He became one of the leading figures in the Russian Baptist Union,

⁸ Todd H. Weir, 'A European Culture War in the Twentieth Century? Anti-Catholicism and Anti-Bolshevism between Moscow, Berlin, and the Vatican 1922 to 1933', *Journal of Religious History*, 39:2 (2015), 280-306 (p. 283). See also: *Transnational anti-communism and the Cold War: agents, activities, and networks*, ed. by Luc van Dongen, Giles Scott-Smith and Stéphanie Roulin (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

⁹ Manuel Borutta, 'Geistliche Gefühle. Medien und Emotionen im Kulturkampf' in *Die Massen bewegen. Medien und Emotionen in der Moderne*, ed. by Frank Bösch and Manuel Borutta (Frankfurt a.M.: Campus Verlag, 2006) pp. 119-141.

¹⁰ Stewart, *A Man in a Hurry*, p. 103.

¹¹ Fetler, *The Thunderer*, pp. 17-25.

which at that time experienced more religious freedom with the Edict of Toleration of 1905 than it had done before.¹² Baptist Evangelicals took advantage of these opportunities for evangelism and started to organise meetings and publish periodicals. Between 1907 and 1914, Fetler established flourishing Baptist churches in St Petersburg and Moscow, reaching the common people and the noble elites with his message. ‘Through heart-repentance we disassociate ourselves from the evil of which we repent’, Fetler argued. ‘The proof of real repentance, acceptable to God, is complete break with that evil. (...) Only then we are able to believe in Christ, for saving faith follows repentance toward God.’¹³ Fetler condemned the Russian Orthodox Church and the Czarist Empire for decadency, being inwardly devoid of true Christianity, and for the abuse of authority. The Orthodox Russians accused the Baptist pastors of attacking the Orthodox priests, holy ikons, and mysteries and they tried to limit the freedom of religion for Baptists and other Evangelicals. Because of his anti-authoritarian opinions and contacts in Western Europe, William Fetler was imprisoned and sentenced to Siberia in 1914, during the First World War. Through the intercession of noblemen this sentence was changed to a lifelong exile from the Russian Empire.¹⁴

In these years, Fetler was a rising star in international Baptist circles. He represented the Baptist Union of Russia at several meetings in the USA and started to create an international network. At that time, religious elites believed that Russia would have religious freedom after the war. Fetler therefore travelled to the United States after his exile from Russia to build networks and evangelical structures to evangelise Russia as fruitful fields, white to harvest for the Lord. Fetler started a Bible School in Philadelphia to train evangelists and publish religious tracts in Russian. In the early 1920s, he founded the Russian Missionary Society, with an international base in several organisations in England, France, Germany, the United States, and Canada. Most of the evangelists settled in the Russian villages of Poland where they found ‘a great hunger for the Gospel’; others made their way over the Soviet borders and tried to evangelise in Bolshevik Russia, ‘though some of them have gained the martyr’s crown’.¹⁵

In the Interbellum, the policy of the Soviets towards religion varied considerably and was sometimes contradictory. In the early 1920s, the focus

¹² Wardin, *On the Edge*, p. 325. See also Heather J. Coleman, *Russian Baptists and Spiritual Revolution, 1905-1929* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), p. 25.

¹³ *Sentenced to Siberia. The story of the Ministry, Persecution, Imprisonment and God’s Wonderful Deliverance of Pastor Basil A. Malof, Russian Missionary*, ed. by O. A. Blumit and O.J. Smith (Wheaton, Ill., Mayflower Publishers, 1943), p. 50.

¹⁴ Fetler, *The Thunderer*, p. 69.

¹⁵ A. McCaig, *The Genesis of the Russian Missionary Society*. Held in the archives of F.W. Grosheide at the Historical Documentation Centre for the History of Protestantism, 1800-present, at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, collection 111.

of the Bolsheviks was on disabling the hierarchy of the Russian Orthodox Church. The marginal religious groups, like local churches or free Evangelicals, were promised more toleration from party leaders. In contrast to this toleration, the Bolshevik party founded at the same time the League of the Godless, supporting anti-religious education of Russian youth. The League was perceived as the incarnation of the devilish regime, but the organisation did not have great success. From 1929, the attitude of the USSR changed with the decree 'on religious associations', which created broad persecution of churches and sects. Baptists, Lutherans, and Roman Catholics were accused of spying, terrorism, and counter-revolutionary behaviour, crimes which could lead to several years of imprisonment.¹⁶

William Fetler worked, because of his banishment from the Russian Empire, from Riga, the capital city of his country of birth, which was an independent republic between 1918 and 1940.¹⁷ Between 1925 and 1927, Fetler built the Pestisanas Temple (Salvation Temple) at the Lāčplēša iela in Riga. This temple, where revival meetings were organised, could accommodate 3750 people in different halls. A special Prayer Tower was built, where Christians could gaze over the city of Riga and pray for the Latvian people.¹⁸ During the 1930s, Fetler experienced resistance from the growing fascism and national socialism in Europe. In 1939, Fetler travelled to America for an international meeting of the Baptist World Alliance with his family. By the time Fetler moved to the United States, he changed his name to Basil A. Malof. 'Malof' meant 'insignificant' in Russian, which was a reference to the humility of John the Baptist.¹⁹ During this long trip, the Second World War broke out and the Russian army invaded Latvia. The Salvation Temple, which was led by Robert Fetler, the brother of William, was confiscated and the Russians changed the temple into a theatre. Fetler could not return to Latvia. He was seen as an arch-enemy of the Soviet State by the Communists because of his denunciation of godless Communism. From the United States, Fetler started new, international-oriented campaigns for war prisoners and Bible translation until his death in 1957.²⁰ His life was characterised by ongoing commitment to revival among the Slavic people and opposition towards political regimes that repressed religion. In this

¹⁶ This paragraph is mostly derived from Daniel Peris, *Storming the heavens, The Soviet League of the Militant Godless* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1998); Stéphanie Roulin, 'A martyr factory? Roman Catholic crusade, Protestant missions and anti-communist propaganda against Soviet anti-religious policies, 1929-37', *Twentieth Century Communism*, 7 (2014), 153-173; Weir, 'A European Culture War in the Twentieth Century?'

¹⁷ Michael North, *The Baltic: A History* (Cambridge, London: Harvard University Press, 2015), pp. 222-234.

¹⁸ Stewart, *A Man In A Hurry*, p. 105.

¹⁹ Wardin, 'William Fetler', *American Baptist Quarterly*.

²⁰ By the time of his naturalisation in the USA, William Fetler changed his name to Basil A. Malof. For reasons of clarity, I only use William Fetler in this article.

religious opposition, the atheism of Russian Bolsheviks became his main target.

Not the Atom Bomb, but the Atomic Bible

The concept of culture wars in the Interbellum explores the religious dimensions of the deep international conflicts that characterised the 1920s and 1930s. It ‘inserts religion into the analysis of the clash of modern worldviews hitherto largely examined from the perspective of political ideology’.²¹ In contrast to the existing historiography of political history, this article identifies the need to take a closer look at the ‘victims’ of USSR policies towards religion. The forced closure of churches or the persecution of clergymen and their influence on the identity of the religious communities is studied in the church history of the Evangelicals and the USSR policies towards religion.²² However, these religious aspects are not integrated into political history. The concept of culture wars thus offers a fruitful intersection between religious and political history and possibility to show the interactions between religion and politics. The case of William Fetler shows us how the identity of a religious community, expressed in the discourses and language, was shaped by the (political) opposition towards atheism and Communism. Fetler depicts his mission as a ‘war’ against Communism and with his rhetoric Fetler shaped the identity of his transnational network of Russian mission and the political view of groups of Christians in Western Europe and the United States. The remainder of this article, therefore, will explore three core components of Fetler’s war discourse.

1. Worldwide War between Communism and Religion

In lots of publications and speeches, William Fetler sketched out the contours of a worldwide war between Communism and religion. He argued that the Communists attacked the fundamentals of Christianity worldwide and that they were hostile to every form of Scriptural belief. The problem of Bolshevism and Christianity is, according to Fetler, a worldwide problem, a ‘weighty problem of the whole civilized world’. Everything that happens in Russia re-echoes somewhere in the world, because the communist system is a world-system which wants to conquer the world to its doctrines. The greatest missionary challenge to the Christian world was, therefore,

²¹ Todd H. Weir, ‘Introduction: Comparing nineteenth- and twentieth-century culture wars’, *Journal of Contemporary History* (2017) (forthcoming).

²² See for example: Constantine Prokhorov, *Russian Baptists and Orthodoxy: 1960-1990: A Comparative Study of Theology, Liturgy, and Traditions* (Carlisle, Langham Monographs, 2013); Toivo Pilli, *Dance or Die: The Shaping of Estonian Baptist Identity under Communism* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2008).

evangelising Bolshevik Russia. According to Fetler, Christians are not so much interested in the political aspects of Communism, but have their focus on the spiritual background and it is their duty to do everything in their power to win this worldwide war against Communism.²³ As mentioned earlier in this article, the *Five-Year Gospel Plan*, published in the early 1930s, shows the argument of the worldwide war between Communism and religion. The Bolsheviks of Russia had started their five-year plan, aiming at the annihilation of all faith in Russia. Russian boys and girls were taught that there is no God and that one had never existed. This work of 'spiritual destruction' would lead to the closing of all churches and to a situation where no Bibles could be found within Soviet borders. To counter this atheist propaganda, Christian forces should unite, Fetler argued in the *Five-Year Gospel Plan*. The Bolsheviks have united all the godless proletariat in an 'attack upon Heaven'; Christians must therefore unite in a 'counter-attack upon Hell'.²⁴

The principle underlying the worldwide struggle between Communism and religion is, according to Fetler, the idea that the communist government intrudes wrongfully into the realm of the human soul. Anatoly Lunacharsky, the USSR's first Commissar of Education, was cited to prove this point: 'We hate Christians. Even the best of them must be regarded as our worst enemies. They preach love to one's neighbour, and pity, which is contrary to our principles.'²⁵ However, in the opinion of Fetler, Christianity will win the worldwide war in the long run. The spiritual walls around Russia, for example the prohibition of Bibles and religious books in Russia, will be broken down in the future.²⁶ In an address before the Evangelical Lutheran Ministers' Conference in 1954, Fetler looked back on his life and struggle with the Communists. He summarised his lifelong struggle in this way:

When the godless Communists came, they declared war on God, denounced the Bible, proclaimed that Religion is the opium of the people, and closed every Sunday School and thousands of churches. But listen, children of Russia! God IS! The Bible cannot be destroyed. The Bible lives. Victory is Christ's!²⁷

²³ Basil A. Malof, 'The greatest missionary challenge of the Christian era for work among the white people', in *Sentenced to Siberia*, ed. by Blumit and Smith, pp. 137-141.

²⁴ *Five-Year Gospel Plan*, p. 4.

²⁵ *Sentenced to Siberia*, p. 104.

²⁶ William Fetler, 'Caesar and God (1926)', in *Wonders of Grace in Russia*, ed. by A. McCaig (Riga: The Revival Press, 1926), pp. 243-251.

²⁷ Basil A. Malof, *God's Bible Way to the Russians. The story of the evangelical reformation in Russia* (Washington: The Russian Bible Society, 1954), p. 14.

2. Power of the Bible and the Spirit

In 1934, Fetler organised a Bible Demonstration against atheism and godlessness and for God and the Bible in Riga. Representatives of all sections of the Latvian evangelical churches united and the Riga press reported that almost 60,000 people took part in the largest Bible demonstration ever held.²⁸ The initiative for this demonstration was sparked by the communist propaganda of infidelity and materialism in Latvia. Fetler wanted to show the power of the Bible itself. This demonstration can be seen as an expression of Fetler's lifelong, unfaltering belief in religious revival through the power of the Bible and the Holy Spirit. This belief in the Bible's power became one of the key elements of Fetler's war idiom in his struggle with the Communists. Despite the prohibition of the Bible, religious tracts, and religious beliefs by Soviet Russia, Fetler believed firmly in the power of God to produce revivals.

First signs of this revival were visible in the revival movement among the Russians. Fetler claimed that, in spite of communist oppression, the evangelical Russian movement grew to six million adherents in the religious wave which swept the Soviet Union. For Fetler this revival of religion was a confirmation of the Bible verse that 'the gates of hell shall not prevail against' the Church of Christ.²⁹ The Bible itself was in Russia raised against godless Communism, 'until communism will perish from the face of the earth'. In his war idiom, Fetler used contemporary examples to prove his points. To achieve the Christian victory against Communism, we do not need the atom bomb, hydrogen bomb, or other military power, but the 'Atomic Bible'. In another statement, Fetler summarised his opinion on the future of the war between the Bible and Communism:

The two — the Bible and communism — cannot long coexist together: one will live, but the other must die. And what will live? That one which is more powerful. And the more powerful is the Word of God which abideth for ever.³⁰

In 1944, Fetler reopened the Russian Bible Society, which was disbanded in 1826 under Czar Nicholas I. From Washington DC, Fetler translated Bibles into Russian and shipped them to the USSR. President Eisenhower received the first copy of the new Russian edition of the New Testament printed by the Society. In poems and tracts, Fetler propagated the position of the United States as a stronghold of freedom against atheism and unfreedom in the USSR. 'Free America' is praised as 'not moved by terror', 'invincible, because one of free choice' and 'the light of justice, truth and

²⁸ *Sentenced to Siberia*, pp. 103-108.

²⁹ Matthew 16.18. Malof, *God's Bible Way to the Russians*, p. 12.

³⁰ Malof, *God's Bible Way to the Russians*, pp. 12-13.

lofty aims'.³¹ Especially in this free Christian country, Christians should engage in the worldwide battle against atheism in the USSR. In his tract *God's Bible Way to the Russians*, a picture of a 'kind-hearted Uncle Sam' was shown while distributing Bibles to Russians. Uncle Sam has become a Bible Colporteur, Fetler wrote, and he hands over Bibles to Russian fathers and sons from his star-spangled hat. He praised American churches and their members for having had a share in the process of printing and distributing Bibles behind the Iron Curtain.³²



Figure 1: Uncle Sam distributing Bibles, from: Basil A. Malof, *God's Bible Way to the Russians*, p. 17. Used by permission of the Russian Bible Society, Inc, P.O. Box 6068, Asheville, NC 28816, USA.

3. The Role of Religious Warriors

In Fetler's conception, Christian believers should play an important role in the worldwide struggle between Christianity and Communism. He stressed the power of the Spirit in the lives of Christians and their commitment to become warriors for Christ. In his *Fundamentals of Revival*, a religious tract written in 1930, William Fetler argued that a Christian church must be a revived church, otherwise it will disappear. Spiritual revival is, according to Fetler, 'the natural result of the meeting and carrying out of definite

³¹ Basil A. Malof, 'Our Native Land. Dedicated to Free America', poem presented to the First Lady at the White House, Washington DC, on 10 June 1940. Printed in *Sentenced to Siberia*, p. 2.

³² Malof, *God's Bible Way to the Russians*, p. 17.

conditions laid down in the Word of God, just as an electrician would go about his business'.³³ Obedience towards God, repentance and breaking with bad habits and sins will lead indisputably to revival. Revival, in turn, will result in a general increase of holiness and righteousness in the lives of the revived people. This will produce a 'spiritual army of believers' or 'soldiers of Christ' who are resistless in battle. Fetler himself is described as General Fetler, training in the meetings and services in his Salvation Temple in Riga 'an army to invade Satan's Kingdom'. 'Every member, both young and old, was mobilised into a mighty soul saving army.'³⁴ As follows from these war metaphors, Fetler sees a major role for this soul-saving army. It is interesting that Fetler's army is understood as a worldwide army. This fits into the view that in the Interwar period, international co-operation between religious groups was increasing, due to the widespread conviction that religious brotherhood was needed to prevent the world from new wars.³⁵ In the Interbellum, the Communist International was the first transnational organised political movement, which caused the founding of other, rival organisations like the transnational Russian Missionary Society of William Fetler.³⁶

After the Russian occupation of Latvia in 1939, the Salvation Temple in Riga was confiscated and all gospel services were banned. Robert Fetler, the brother of William, was arrested and sent to Siberia along with many other pastors from Latvia, where he suffered a horrible death in the Communist prison camps.³⁷ According to St  phanie Roulin, references to martyrdom were a common theme in European anti-communist propaganda and strengthened the identity of anti-communist groups. The *Entente internationale anticommuniste*, the first large transnational anti-communist organisation, called their members to a crusade for the Christian martyrs under Communism.³⁸ The victims of the communist persecutions became the embodiment of anti-communist propaganda. In the history of European Baptists, this theme was already present before the founding of the Protestant anti-communist organisations. William Fetler is represented in a series of Baptist heroes and martyrs, published in 1911. In the introduction to this volume, J.N. Prestridge stated that

³³ William Fetler, *The Fundamentals of Revival. Or Is There no Balm in Gilead?* (The Revival Press: London, Toronto, 1930), p. 7.

³⁴ Stewart, *A Man in a Hurry*, p. 103.

³⁵ See for example the Dutch context: George Harinck, "'We may no longer restrict our horizon till one country": Neo-Calvinism and Internationalism in the Interbellum Era', in *European Encounters. Intellectual Exchange and the Rethinking of Europe 1914-1945*, European Studies 32, ed. by Carlos Reijnen and Marleen Rensen (Rodopi: Amsterdam/New York, 2014), pp. 225-245.

³⁶ Weir, 'Introduction: Comparing nineteenth- and twentieth-century culture wars', p. 8.

³⁷ Stewart, *A Man in A Hurry*, p. 115.

³⁸ Roulin, 'A martyr factory?', p. 154.

every war has its budget of cost, and the Baptists have always been at war. They have been in the very nature of their calling the religious warriors of the centuries, and they possess the warrior's virtues and the warrior's faults, and they must naturally expect to leave their dead upon the world's battle fields.³⁹

References to martyrs, like Robert Fetler and his family, are polemically used by Fetler as witnesses against the devilish regime of the Communists. William Fetler himself is represented as one who was protected by God 'from torture and death in the Gulag', because of Fetler's absence from Latvia in June 1940.⁴⁰ For Fetler, the real struggle is a spiritual one, and is most fought out by silent Christians, people who will be martyrs and who groan under the regime's pressure and persecution. Their perseverance in reading the Bible against all tribulation becomes, in Fetler's polemic, supportive of his own anti-communist message and demand for financial and spiritual support.⁴¹ Fetler's argument about sound Christianity flows seamlessly over into a financial appeal for his evangelisation projects, for which he needed large amounts of money. The costs of the Salvation Temple in Riga, for example, were \$100,000.00, to be paid by international communities of Christians.⁴² In 1925, Fetler designed the Moscow Gospel Campus and Missionary Centre, including a large building with an auditorium, Bible Schools, printing plants for Bibles, and a hospital. In his fundraising campaigns, moral and religious appeals are made to the Christian public to give money for Christ. When a journalist from The Netherlands asked Fetler whether his ideas were too big to realise, Fetler answered:

earthly rulers and war-lords have spent billions in money for weapons of destruction and death, and few of their subjects raise their voice in objection to such terrible and negative spending. Why, then, do we who are the followers of Christ, the Prince of Peace, hesitate to undertake to raise and spend but a few mere millions for a program and enterprise which would bring salvation, blessing and eternal life to multitudes of our fellow men, women and innocent children in Russia?⁴³

Conclusion

William Fetler fought for much of his life against the atheism of the Bolsheviks and for revival among the Russians. In this article I have investigated how Fetler interpreted his mission in the context of this struggle with Communism. We should, in the first place, acknowledge that Fetler's anti-Communism should be understood as anti-totalitarianism and as an

³⁹ J. N. Prestridge, *Modern Baptist Heroes and Martyrs* (Louisville: The World Press, 1911), p. 12.

⁴⁰ Janis Smits, 'Foreword', in Fetler, *The Thunderer*, p. 9.

⁴¹ Fetler, 'A Dream and a Vision', in *Sentenced to Siberia*, pp. 145-151.

⁴² Stewart, *A Man in A Hurry*, p. 104.

⁴³ Fetler, 'A Dream and a Vision', in *Sentenced to Siberia*, p. 150.

argument against political influence on religion. In the view of William Fetler, the State, either Czarist or Communist, should never interfere in the religious domain. The bodies of the people can be ruled by political laws, but the souls of the people should not. Fetler's anti-Communism is therefore a continuation of his critique on the Czarist regimes and the relationship towards the Russian Orthodox Church.

After the Bolshevik Revolution, Fetler and his fellow church leaders had great hopes of religious freedom and toleration of evangelical groups. However, the changing attitude of the Bolshevik party, culminating in the 1929 law which declared churches illegal, had an impact on Fetler's message. He recognised the danger of the atheism of the Communists and tried to oppose this obliteration of religion from Russia with missionary activities. In contrast to the increasing pressure of evangelical Christians by the USSR government, William Fetler claimed a 'wave of religion'. In Communist Russia, over 800 new Baptist churches came into being, according to a letter of Fetler. He cited Lunacharsky that since the Bolshevik Revolution 'the evangelicals have grown from about 100,000 to over 6,000,000'.⁴⁴ However, we cannot support this statement of Fetler with other sources, due to the fact that statistics were fragile during Communist times. Perhaps the revival in the Soviet Union was part of Fetler's dreams and his fundraising rhetoric rather than a reality.

The case of William Fetler and his international missionary networks introduces a new perspective to the study of transnational anti-Communism in the twentieth century. Until now, most of the historical attention to the conflicts between Christianity and secularism are described from the perspective of political history and mostly focus on the ideas of liberal politicians. In the last few years this attention has been changing as seen, for example, in the work of St  phanie Roulin.⁴⁵ The focus of this article is on William Fetler, one of the people who directly experienced the impact of Bolshevik measures on religious communities in the Interbellum. It adds a strictly religious dimension to the struggle between Western countries and the Russian Communists. Fetler's war is not directed against Communism as a political ideology, but against Communism as an atheist movement. He was not, like other Christian organisations which are described by Roulin, focused on a religious charge against a political ideology, but only focused on mission and revival.

I have pointed out three components of Fetler's use of war metaphors which reflect these experiences. The role of William Fetler as missionary

⁴⁴ Stewart, *A Man in A Hurry*, p. 75.

⁴⁵ St  phanie Roulin, *Un credo anticommuniste. La commission Pro Deo de l'Entente Internationale Anticommuniste ou la dimension religieuse d'un combat politique (1924-1945)* (Lausanne: Antipodes, 2010).

leader shows us how the identity of a missionary community, which is expressed in the discourses and language, was shaped by the opposition towards atheism and Communism. Fetler depicts his mission as a 'war' against Communism and with his rhetoric he shaped the identity of his transnational network of Russian mission. Communist secularism thus caused a new type of discourse and organisation by William Fetler. His religious anti-communist discourse produced new initiatives of mission and has helped shape the attitude of Baptists towards Bolsheviks. But also in other countries, like The Netherlands, initiatives were established to support William Fetler. These initiatives also sparked debates about the identity of the Dutch Protestants themselves, as I have studied elsewhere.⁴⁶ Further research should elaborate on this path of research and should engage with the impact of anti-Communism on the identity of Christian communities in the United States and Europe. All in all, the anti-communist discourse of Fetler shows the relevance of the observation of historian Todd Weir that historians of religion must take seriously the deep impact of secularism on religious thought and politics.⁴⁷

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⁴⁶ Koos-jan de Jager, 'Contested Crossing of Missionary Borders: Pastor William A. Fetler and the Russian Missionary Society in the Netherlands, 1931-1936', *Trajecta. Religion, Culture and Society in the Low Countries* (forthcoming).

⁴⁷ Weir, 'Introduction: Comparing nineteenth- and twentieth-century culture wars', p. 11.